

DIRTY FILTHY LIARS

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ABSTRACT

Set amidst the chaos of a Deepwater Horizon-level disaster at an oilsands facility owned by Apex Petroleum, *Dirty Filthy Liars* follows the firm's acid-tongued PR director, Victoria "Vic" McNaughton, as she desperately tries to save two geese trapped by an on-site explosion... Which is part of a plan to outmaneuver a cunning, ambitious lackey who's gunning for her job. To make matters worse, she's hounded by a self-righteous journalist who also happens to be her ex-boyfriend, who she may or may not still have feelings for. Along the way, they stumble into a conspiracy to defraud Apex's shareholders and Vic must decide whether to expose the truth or continue living her comfortable lie.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Above all, writing *Dirty Filthy Liars* has been a learning experience, so I must acknowledge the contributions of my teacher, Howard Wiseman. The subject matter, tone and genre stretched my writing abilities well beyond what I was capable of two years ago, and I doubt I would have completed the draft without Howie's guidance, skepticism and trenchant attention to detail. If my life was a boxing movie, Howie would be the guy in the panel van driving behind me, threatening to run me down if I stopped.

And sometimes when you're writing, you just need someone to tell you when you're completely full of shit. For that I had Brenda Longfellow, and her uncanny ability to zero in on technical and thematic shortcomings with laser accuracy. I don't think I would have been nearly as honest with the script if I didn't have someone who could instantly tell when I wasn't.

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A WORD ON THE SCREENPLAY FORMAT

Screenplays are weird. Originally more of a technical aide for directors to decide what to shoot and in what order ("The origins and formatting of the modern screenplay" 2016), they've since evolved into a hybrid technical document/literary form that demands both a mastery of evocative visual language and a near-total disregard for the basic rules of good grammar. The primary goal of the screenwriter is to briskly and memorably suggest the film that might be, sentence fragments and dangling prepositions be damned. It must be compelling and it must be beautiful if it has any hope of capturing and keeping the attention of those who will bring it to life but, once the film it describes is produced, it will be forgotten. In this way, the purpose of the modern screenplay is not so far removed from its origins as a glorified shot list—like an architect's blueprint, it is not the finished product, but it is nonetheless vital.

If this is the first screenplay you've ever read, the format is probably fairly self-explanatory, however there are a few conventions that may require further elaboration. The first, and perhaps the most important, is the scene heading. In their most basic possible form, they look like this:

INT. A BAR - NIGHT

Those first three letters describe whether the scene takes place inside or outside. Here I've used "INT," short for "INTERIOR." An EXTERIOR scene would have "EXT" here instead. The next part describes the location. If I wished to describe a location within a location, I would separate that with another hyphen, like so:

INT. A BAR - WINDOWED FRONT ROOM - NIGHT

Finally, the last part of the scene heading (or "scene slug," as they're sometimes called), is an indication of time. Typically, these are either "DAY" or "NIGHT," though if a more specific time is important to the story for some reason, it might say something like "10:06 PM" or "LATE EVENING." Sometimes, in order to create a greater sense of continuity between scenes, a screenwriter may indicate the time in a relative fashion, with something like "LATER" or "HOURS LATER."

The only other potentially perplexing bit of jargon I can foresee is the occasional (and very inconsistent) use of transitions. These are formatted to the right, and usually look something like:

SMASH CUT TO:

INT. A DIFFERENT LOCATION - A DIFFERENT TIME

A "SMASH CUT," as per this example, is an intentionally abrupt transition designed to raise the viewer's heart rate or strategically draw their attention to the artifice of the film. A "MATCH CUT" is a cut designed to "match" the information in the current frame to the next frame in some way, often on a specific detail, such as a character's face. A "DIP" is a fast fade to a specific color, usually white or black. Finally, a regular "CUT" describes virtually any transition from one shot to another, and is thus generally omitted entirely (I use one in the script for comic effect).

For the most part, the formatting I use in this script adheres to convention. The only deviation I make is the bolding of scene slugs, which is still uncommon but growing in acceptance (August, "Okay to use bold for sluglines and scene headers?").

It's generally considered bad form to use bolding or italics to put emphasis on specific words in dialogue, however there is some informal acceptance of their use if it's both sparing and absolutely necessary to communicate the intention of a line. In action text (scene description), bolding and italics are never used, however capitalization is used liberally and, often, almost arbitrarily to create impact or emphasize specific ideas. Again: Screenplays are weird.

ORIGINS

"WRITE WHAT YOU KNOW"

Whenever someone asks why I wanted to write a script set in the Canadian oil and gas industry, the easiest answer is that I have a lot of experience both working in it, and growing up around it. After all, aren't writers supposed to "write what [we] know?" But the real answer isn't quite this simple.

To begin with, "write what you know," might be the most misapplied principle of good writing that I've ever heard (or, for that matter, had repeated at me *ad nauseum*). Its most literal interpretation is almost oppressively restrictive, and in my experience tends to produce a lot of stories about introverted young people who dream of being successful writers. Worse, this literal interpretation is absurd on the face of it. If the goal is simply to render the world authentically, what details of even the most extraordinary lifestyles can not be learned via thorough research? Ride-alongs or interviews with police and those in other dramatic occupations are easily arranged, almost every country in the world is visitable instantly with a few clicks on Google Maps. What data cannot be found at the library is usually hiding somewhere, in some dark recess of the internet. It is easier than ever to write a

perfectly-detailed, perfectly-believable, perfectly-boring story.

Even more damning, this adage utterly fails to account for the thousands upon thousands of wonderful stories in every medium that the authors did not (and could not) have any direct experience with whatsoever. Unless Zadie Smith has a secret time machine, there's no way she could have "known" how to write the gripping World War Two sequences in her award-winning novel *White Teeth*, and yet while reading them I felt as though I could smell the engine oil and taste the gunpowder. Without a crystal ball, there's no way Hampton Fancher and David Peoples could have "known" how to render such a believably decayed future-metropolis (populated in part by androids and patrolled by flying police cars, no less) in *Blade Runner*. Yet this literalist interpretation of "write what you know" remains commonly and unthinkingly accepted as true despite the fact it's obviously, even self-evidently, false.

Add a single word to the phrase and it instantly becomes more palatable: "write what you know *emotionally*." Now, we're no longer saying one should regurgitate *information* one is familiar with, we're saying one should engage with the internal journeys of characters with which one can authentically empathise.

To use a lurid example, when I was sixteen I was in a car chase. Out one night in Vancouver, following a night of racing

down freeways and other petty acts of juvenile delinquency, my cousins and I were pursued through the streets by an enormous black truck with tinted windows and chrome everything. When the driver eventually cornered us in a cul-de-sac, it turned out he was unhappy we had (accidentally) pelted his vehicle with some garbage earlier in the evening. The confrontation resolved without much incident, though the pursuit itself remains one of the most terrifying memories of my adolescence. The positive outcome, however, is that I now feel entirely comfortable communicating feelings of terror, dread, and the very specific sort of anxiety one feels when one is less protected by the law because one has, in some way, stood on the wrong side of it.

Since my teenage years were dotted with incidents like this one, maybe it's no surprise that when I graduated university I also graduated from amateur knucklehead to professional bad guy. Though I dabbled a bit in freelance journalism for a couple years, mostly covering architecture, arts and design, my first "real" job was doing corporate communications (i.e. spin) for an oilsands firm. When I took the job, I remember having a nagging feeling in the back of my head telling me not to do it (a feeling I would later come to recognize as a conscience), but I was also twenty-two, broke and terrified of the world I was already barely surviving. Add to this a lack of political sophistication typical of people that age and a history of being

comfortable being perceived negatively (even by myself), and it was almost a foregone conclusion I would accept the company's very, very, very generous offer.

I approached my new job with what I thought was a healthy amount of skepticism. I took all the arguments and "key messages" with a grain of salt, though I was impressed by the company's commitment to backing these things up with hard numbers and statistics. I rewrote most of the company's core positions to make them memorable and snappy, and I was assigned files for technology and "sustainable development"--basically, it was my job to take dry technological descriptions and environmental policy and explain it to the public in a way that painted the company in a favorable light. I spent so long repeating the words (or rather, training vacant-eyed old men to) that part of me started to believe them. But then gas prices took a bit of a dip and the brutal, indifferent nature of the corporation became all-too obvious. This was my first experience with what the managerial ghouls called "trimming the fat," "rightsizing" or "streamlining." (Gingell, "Where did soul-sucking office speak first come from?")

People were fired, nonessential projects were cut, and budgets were justified in windy memos that seemed to be written more in an effort to make the reader give up out of boredom and frustration rather than fight through to the end. Most

memorably, hundreds of people wriggled and squirmed to make sure it wasn't their heads on the chopping block when the cuts swept through their departments. Knowing it was not a matter of "if" someone would be fired, but rather "who" and "how many," the weakest members of every team were systematically identified and professionally sabotaged in order to make them more obvious targets. The sentiments behind this behavior weren't cruel exactly, but probably most accurately described by a cliché borrowed from countless action movies: "just business."

I remember having one conversation with a Biologist who I had worked with on the Sustainable Development file, and liked. I'll call him Larry. His job was, for the most part, tracking and preserving populations of "charismatic megafauna" (i.e. cute and/or majestic animals of a certain size) through B.C. by predicting breeding patterns and advising the business guys where to avoid building pipelines and facilities. One of his pet projects (no pun intended) was a preserve for an endangered caribou herd in the middle of the province, which is what he wanted to talk to me about. It was a big talking point in a lot of my materials, and he was asking me to back off because the company was cutting the program without leaving him enough to ensure their safety. I pushed and prodded, groping around for a positive angle, but he eventually just slapped his knees and sighed.

"If it doesn't directly contribute to the bottom line, it gets cut," Larry said. "That's what they told me."

Larry was "released from the company" a few months later.

That stuck with me. On one hand, it's a story so typical of a cutthroat big business that it's a little embarrassing I was surprised by it at all. On the other, I think the nuances make it compelling. The fact that people like Larry are employed by oil companies *at all* suggests corporations are capable of seeing value in things besides money, or at the very least they're capable of recognizing that other people do, and they recognize the value of those opinions. It's just that when the screws of capitalism tighten even slightly, that fragile little sliver of self awareness is the first thing that breaks. That's why this story was formative for me: it was when I stopped seeing corporations as a businesses run by people, and started seeing them as a machines that ground people up.

I wish I could say this is when I threw my Blackberry to the ground and quit. Unfortunately, real-life revelation, unlike movie revelation, happens gradually. It took a few more years, a few more events like this one, and a few long looks in the mirror before I understood why it always felt like there was a big lump of numb nothingness in my chest. I had become a part of this enormous, indifferent machine that was making moral choices for me--that was, as Orwell says, "thinking my thoughts for me"

(Orwell 2015). And I was terrified by what it—I, we—were capable of.

This was the emotion I needed to write. In this way, the fact that *Dirty Filthy Liars* takes place in the oilsands industry is subordinate to the themes and ideas surrounding identity, morality and individuality that it explores. It could be set in the automotive industry, the aviation industry or the unobtainium¹ industry and still remain fundamentally the same. The oil and gas industry just so happened to be an excellent, current, globally-relevant example of corporations' irresponsibly vast power.

And so I wrote what I knew.

GENRE

In another way, I wrote what I didn't know at all. I wrote my first serviceable feature screenplay in 2010, and continued at a rate of about one a year since. I've written about as many TV scripts, an eight hour videogame script, and more sketches than I can count. Though I've written a lot in terms of volume, I can't say as much for the variation--almost all of these were some version of a broad comedy or crime story. From the very beginning with *Dirty Filthy Liars*, one of my primary goals was

¹ Unobtainium is a tongue-in-cheek stand-in for scarce natural resources in many science fiction stories. See "Unobtainium" in the bibliography for more.

to stretch myself, take big risks, and grow as an artist. One of the ways I did that was by stepping way outside my generic comfort zone.

Though the genre has fluctuated as I produced drafts, the script I initially set out to write and the one I wrote are actually fairly similar: A brisk, pointed comedy with machinegun dialogue and a screwball comic sensibility. *His Girl Friday* and *Network* were strong tonal and stylistic influences, but so were more modern films like *The Social Network*, *In the Loop* and *Charlie Wilson's War*. The major action of this kind of film usually happens in boardrooms or in hushed sidebar conversations in hallways, but the dialogue itself always feels eventful and entertaining. And both Aaron Sorkin (*The Social Network*, *Charlie Wilson's War*) and Armando Iannucci (*In the Loop*) excel at writing dialogue as a kind of verbal combat. In Sorkin's scripts, that combat is fought with épées--subtle weapons used for scoring points. Iannucci's verbal weapons of choice, on the other hand, are more like broken beer bottles and tire irons--improvised, vulgar things wielded by the desperate and bloodthirsty. Though *Dirty Filthy Liars* dabbles in both styles, I believe it relies much more on the latter.

The reason for this, I think, is because Iannucci and I seem to share a worldview. Like Sorkin, Iannucci usually writes about rich and powerful people who we want to expect a lot from--we

expect them to behave responsibly, to act with conscience, to be competent. And while Sorkin indulges that fantasy of the Philosopher King, Iannucci explicitly and violently rejects it. In his work, the supposedly-powerful often have much less influence than they seem to, and are motivated by the same petty jealousy, spitefulness and mean-spiritedness real people often are. It's undoubtedly nihilistic, but I think there's something honest about it too.

Finally, the last film to occupy a lot of mental space as I wrote *Dirty Filthy Liars* was Alexander McKendrick's noir classic, *Sweet Smell of Success*. Though that film is perhaps best known for its style--its New York City is a shadowy labyrinth peopled exclusively by fast-talking schemers, its style so breathless and gritty it's almost a parody of the genre--I believe its similarities with my script are more thematic and archetypal. *Sweet Smell of Success* is the story of a desperate press agent who's manipulated by an arrogant entertainment columnist into breaking up a relationship between the columnist's sister and her musician boyfriend. Motivated solely by greed, the press agent ignores any opportunity to change for the better and, at the end of the story, is ruined by his hubris.

There's a Shakespearian quality to the story to be sure, though I think an even better descriptive comparison can be

found in one of Shakespeare's influences, the Italian tradition of the *Commedia Dell'Arte* (Gilvary 7-12). *Commedia Dell'Arte* (literally "the comedy of the artists") was style of improvised comedy popular in late-1500s Italy that utilized the use of stock characters whose roles were represented in the performance by the use of masks (Rudin 34). The cast of stock characters is sprawling, but there are a few in particular that provide some insight into the construction of *Sweet Smell of Success* (and, thus, *Dirty Filthy Liars*). I'll discuss the specific parallels of the *Commedia Dell'Arte's* stock types to my own work in the "characters" section further on.

The Vecchi are "old men" characters, arguably the most famous of which is Pantalone, who Kevin Gilvary describes as "a Venetian merchant or magnifico, who is pompous, tyrannical and prone to sententious speeches." (7) Gilvary goes on to point out that this also describes Shylock in *The Merchant of Venice*, Brabantio in *Othello*, or Polonius in *Hamlet* (ibid) and, I would add to the list, J.J. Hunsecker, the corrupt, villainous Broadway columnist in *Sweet Smell of Success*.

The Pair of Lovers are staples of the *Commedia Dell'Arte*, and one is usually the child of Pantalone, and can be seen in Shakespeare in *The Comedy of Errors*, *Love's Labour's Lost*, *Romeo and Juliet* and so on (Gilvary 8). In *Sweet Smell of Success*, the

plot directly concerns the relationship between two lovers--specifically, the protagonist's attempts to end it.

Finally there are the Zanni, madcap servant characters who are witty, clever, cunning and often treacherous, and whose efforts drive the story forward (Gilvary 8-9). Two major Zanni are Arlecchino (or "Harlequin"), who was often cruel or heartless, and Brighella, who was witty and coarse, and usually planned to undermine his master in some way (ibid). Examples of these types of characters in Shakespeare include Puck in *Midsummer Night's Dream*, Iago in *Othello*, Curtis in *Taming of the Shrew* (ibid), and so on. Sidney Falco, the protagonist of *Sweet Smell of Success*, embodies all of these qualities, and his efforts to appear helpful to Hunsecker while actually undermining and manipulating him for personal gain fits in well with the tradition of the *Commedia Dell'Arte*.

The reason I'm emphasizing this is because I believe *Sweet Smell of Success'* purpose--like the purpose of *Commedia Dell'Arte*, and my purpose with *Dirty Filthy Liars*--is satirical. McKendrick's film depicted the desperate machinations of its characters and their meaningless struggles for power and dominance as a brutally pointed satire of Broadway and celebrity culture, much in the same way *Commedia Dell'Arte* performances would satirize local politics and municipal corruption in the places they visited (Gilvary 6). I used a similar technique in

constructing the plot of *Dirty Filthy Liars* by using timeless theatrical "types" that I shaded and detailed in ways specific to the setting, then dropped them into a somewhat elevated screwball scenario that used those characters to make a damning (but funny) condemnation of corporate greed and corruption.

REALITY

Lastly, I think it's important to comment on my representation of reality in the piece. The idea of images (i.e. distortions/lies) versus the "truth" is embedded in the story in many ways, from the depictions of the two different incident response rooms, the juxtaposition in Vic and Cameron's professions, Vic's photograph on her magnetic badge versus her actual run-down appearance, Cameron's high opinion of himself versus the reality of his somewhat ignominious position, the title, the ultimate nature of the conspiracy and so on. In the way I present these opposing representations of reality, however, I'm also attempting to acknowledge the fact that the film itself will necessarily be an image (i.e. distortion/lie) of the oil and gas industry with its own agenda and intentions, and not an accurate depiction of the same.

The effect I intend is to be somewhat disorienting--it should not be clear which parts of the story are accurate and which are exaggerations (and, based on the feedback I've

received in this regard, it is not). In other words, I wanted the story to feel elevated but plausible. The reason for this is because the reality of oil and gas is often much stranger than fiction, and indeed, the fiction is often more believable. By essentially telling the reader/viewer that none of what they see can be taken at face value, what I hope to do is help them accept the fact and the fiction as two sides of the same coin. Narrative, after all, is not a depiction of events as they happened, it is the storyteller's *version* of events. Which is to say that *Dirty Filthy Liars* is not in any way an accurate depiction of reality--it is an accurate depiction of my deeply flawed, biased perspective on reality, filtered through the inherently manipulative language of cinema. But it is, as David Sedaris says, "true enough" (Haber, "David Sedaris' 97 per cent rule").

CHARACTERS

VICTORIA "VIC" MCNAUGHTON (38)

Vic was the character the occurred to me first, and though she's changed along with the script, the important parts of her have always remained fairly constant in my imagination. Based in part on an acquaintance of mine, I wanted Vic to embody virtues that had been tragically corrupted by her circumstances. Namely, she's extremely disciplined, ambitious, clever and persuasive, but her pride has twisted these admirable means toward corrupt ends. And it's not even that she's greedy--it's just that she's been seduced by her own ego, and her conscience needs to be numbed with expensive booze and other material things. But by removing her from the insulating bubble of the city and sending her on the odyssey to save the geese, I broke down each of her psychological crutches one by one² and forced her to look at herself in a new light.

BACKSTORY

Vic's backstory, beyond the aborted journalism career alluded to in the script itself, is that she came from an extremely strict, verbally abusive family where she learned to

² Her money doesn't work on Dave, her persuasive ability doesn't work on Cameron, she loses her tools (phone, suitcase, and fancy clothes) while on her journey, and then her cognitive dissonance is shattered by the discovery of the fake work site. More on this in the "structure" section.

protect herself with sarcasm and emotional distance. The only way to have any dignity was to win whatever argument was ongoing at the time, so she learned to automatically distill her speech into barbed little soundbites. When her mother couldn't take anymore and left, her father remarried, and Vic met her new, preternaturally ebullient stepsister, Tanis. Tanis eventually wore down Vic's emotional defenses simply by being the only person who was ever unconditionally kind to her. Seeing this sort of guilelessness as a weakness, Vic repaid Tanis by keeping her close and protecting her from the rest of the world, unwittingly turning her colder and harder in the process.

VIC'S MASK: BRIGHELLA

Vic's main *Commedia* mask is Brigella, one of the zanni (servants) who, as Gilvary says is "cunning, witty, often coarse, and plays jokes at other's expense. [She] plots to double-cross [her] master, Pantalone, usually successfully" (10). However, since a major subplot concerns the lingering flames of her relationship with Cameron, she's also one of the Lovers, whose "love [is] forbidden e.g. due of an imbalance of status or an ancient family enmity" (8), or in this case, two fundamentally opposed professions.

In the text, Vic's mask is represented by her Magnetic ID badge. Not only is it a literal indication of her status as a

servant of Apex Petroleum, the juxtaposition of her face on the object itself and her actual face is my subtle suggestion that the real person has been sublimated by the role she's playing. At the end of the script, when a new ID badge is seen being issued to Wally, Vic's briefly-glimpsed underling, I'm indicating that her mask--her function--is being passed to another player.

TANIS MCNAUGHTON (28)

Tanis is Vic's step-sister and only close friend. Bubbly, kind and forthright to a fault, she's the sort of person it's difficult not to like, even for someone as distrustful as Vic. Tanis' major flaw is that she's never really learned to feel sadness and use it constructively; instead, she's found ways to avoid negative emotions entirely, leading directly to her peanut butter, alcohol, and cocaine habits.

Tanis' dramatic purpose in the story is to further humanize and define Vic. Especially because Vic is so icy and sharp-tongued in the early pages, it seemed necessary to give her one person to be softer and warmer around, if only to engage the audience more in her journey. More critically, however, Tanis plays the role of an emotional antagonist. She worships her sister almost unthinkingly, and thus enables many of her bad habits (e.g. materialism and excessive drinking). At the end of

the story, when Vic temporarily loses Tanis' respect by betraying her company (but gains the audience's), it provides a strong temptation to reverse her change in character.

BACKSTORY

Vic always did well in school, but kept her head down. Tanis did the inverse--her grades were fine, but unremarkable, and she made up for it by doing every extracurricular she could. Model UN, student government, debate club--the works. And her parents couldn't have been prouder of her. She was the daughter they always wanted. That's a big part of why she became friends with Vic--she knew they'd love to make their daughters compete, so the best way to annoy them was to become best friends.

MASK: NONE

_____Tanis doesn't fit cleanly into any of the *Commedia Dell'Arte* archetypes. She is, in terms of the plot mechanics, and extension of Vic, so the argument could be made that she shares Vic's brighella mask, however she doesn't share many of the other characteristics. My intention with introducing the *Commedia Dell'Arte* was to further deepen my description of the story, not prescribe it's every detail, so I'd rather accept it as an imperfect cognate rather than shoehorn in connections where there are none.

BEN DAVISON (35)

Ben is the primary antagonist of the story, and by far the character who was the most fun to write. A sociopathic little wad of resentment, entitlement and arrogance, Ben is my giddily unsubtle caricature of corporate culture. His mechanical purpose is to throw up obstacles that prevent Vic from getting what she wants³, and generally be an unpleasant nuisance in her life. His comic purpose is to give a sharply-rendered voice to the values of the culture *Dirty Filthy Liars* is criticising.

Ben is based in part on two former bosses who were an extremely unpleasant combination of totally incompetent, scheming, and utterly certain that, given the evidence of their well-paid positions, they must be geniuses. I modified Ben somewhat to match the tone of the script (he's quick-witted and at least partly aware of his own nastiness), but I think that his intelligence makes his role a more damning satirization of corporate culture than if he had been a more dopey pawn.

BACKSTORY

Ben's a winner from a family of winners. His father was conservative politician and his mother was his campaign strategist--PR is in his blood. When he was fifteen, his father was caught in a major scandal and his family was ruined. The

³ I.E. saving her job

wealth and privilege he once had was ripped away. This made him obsessed with control and regaining what he lost, and resentful of reporters (and the social function of journalism generally). Ben sees the world in purely cosmetic terms, so he uses drugs to fill the void of meaning in his life (though he doesn't know this is why).

MASK: ARLECCHINO (HARLEQUIN)

Ben is the dark reflection of Vic, and so his mask is the dark reflection of hers. Like Arlecchino, Ben is "witty and clever, often capricious, heartless or parasitical" (Gilvary 9), and "therefore the main satirical character" (ibid). Ben's shortsighted focus on meaningless status and the mindless ruthlessness with which he's willing to pursue it is my indictment of the values he represents.

CAMERON MILNER (37)

Cameron was born about fifteen years too late. He has the integrity and eloquence of an old-guard Newsman like an Edward Murrow or a Dan Rather (not that any of them really lived up to their legends anyway), but he's stuck working for a popular-but-facile web-news program called Kerfufflewatch (which sits somewhere on the integrity spectrum between BuzzFeed and Vice). Part of the reason is the alluded-to confabulation scandal he

was wrapped up in with Vic--he distanced himself from her to try and distance himself from it, but he never entirely got clear. He's bitter about this, and has made up for his lower status by being self-righteous about his purpose.

BACKSTORY

When Cameron was ten, his mom bought him a Big Book of Puzzles, and he solved them all in a week. And he did the same thing with the next, and the next... All of which is to say Cameron has always had a compulsion to figure things out. If there's a puzzle in front of him to be solved, he'll solve it.

When he was twelve, the North England mining company his father and two older brothers worked for pulled out because it was too expensive to pay for union labour. Things got worse and his family went on pogeys and never got off. He's had a chip on his shoulder about corporatization ever since. It placed him very firmly on the side of the underdog (or undergoose), always.

When he was fifteen things seemed to be turning around, with his mom's new promotion bringing in all kinds of new money. A few months later, he realized she hadn't been promoted, and was actually stealing from her employers to help give her family the little extra things. She did a year in jail, and the company sued them for what little they had. But the worst part was the

pain of being lied to by his mother--this made him brutally honest to the point of rudeness.

MASK: CAPITANO

The best mask that describes Cameron's role is that of Capitano--the boastful soldier who is sometimes also one of the Lovers (Gilvary 10). As alluded to in the script, Cameron was briefly embedded as a journalist in a military unit, where he was injured (and now suffers from PTSD as a result). I leave it ambiguous as to whether he's actually overstating the importance of his contribution, or whether that's just Vic's defensive perspective on it--but in any event there's no doubt he likes to bring it up at every opportunity.

MALCOLM JANKE (60s)

Malcolm is a husk. Completely infected by the soul-destroying thought virus of corporate culture, he has almost no real personality left. His last shred of individuality is the chicken pesto panini he's introduced while eating--and dies shortly after acquiring at the end of the script. Malcolm is an automaton powered entirely by synergies, outside-the-box-thinking and go-forward solutions.

BACKSTORY

Malcolm is unremarkable. He came from a rich family, went to a nice school, got a nice job, and didn't even notice that he never bothered to develop a real personality, or to even learn how not to be a complete pushover. And now it's much too late.

MASK: PANTALONE

Malcolm, and the executives of the company in a general sense, are the vecchi of *Dirty Filthy Liars*. He is the rich aristocrat (executive) who the servants ostensibly work for, but are actually running circles around and scheming against.

THEME

Theme might be the second most abused term in screenwriting, surpassed only by the seemingly infinite uses of the term "beat." The popular press will use "theme" to describe almost anything in a film, from recurring events, motifs, and sometimes even character goals--"wildly inconsistent" doesn't even begin to describe it. Merriam Webster's dictionary calls it "the main subject that is being discussed or described in a piece of writing, a movie, etc." ("Theme" 2016), which at least indicates that a theme is tied in some way to a piece's meaning, but is still far too vague to be useful. As a writer searching for tools to enhance my storytelling, one of the best I've found is in Robert McKee's *Story*, where he substitutes the term "controlling idea" and writes that it is "a single sentence describing how and why life undergoes change from one condition of existence at the beginning to another at the end" (McKee 115).

What I like about McKee's version is that he connects the meaning of the story to its mechanics. Actions are taken and choices are made by characters, and the values of these actions are accounted for and acknowledged by the storyteller. Then, when a particular character has built up a history of choices and actions, their success, failure, ruin, martyrdom, or

whatever other end they might meet communicates a specific argument about the types of choices a person in the real world *ought* to make. This probably sounds a bit Biblical, but it's actually quite a bit older than that.

In *Poetics*, Aristotle describes the "reversal of the situation and the recognition" as "produc[ing] a tragic effect that satisfies the moral sense. This effect is produced when the clever rogue, like Sisyphus, is outwitted, or the brave villain defeated" (Aristotle 2016). In other words, the theme describes both a character's arc *and* the audience's experience of it. This idea was underlined again more recently, at a conference I attended last year in Austin, Texas, where screenwriter Craig Mazin described the idea as a "central dramatic argument," or a rhetorical statement about reality that the protagonist begins in ignorance of, but through the events of the story, comes to embody (Mazin 2015).

As I alluded to earlier, while *Dirty Filthy Liars* is set in the oil and gas industry, and a lot of the specific detail is about oil and gas, the main thematic thrust isn't specific to the industry at all. At its core, this is a story about the dehumanizing nature of corporate culture, and the oil sands industry just happens to be an excellent example of that. It is, to phrase it as a central dramatic argument, about how setting aside your values for material success doesn't just endanger

your soul, but also the souls of everyone who respects or cares about you.

With this thematic content, the tough question for me personally was: What's a soul? I wasn't satisfied with the Judeo-Christian definition that usually gets used reflexively when we're talking about souls and spirituality. Specifically, I was interested in the soul that's referred to by secular colloquialisms like "soul-sucking corporate job," "selling your soul for money" or "soul crushing work." Because while we all have some intuitive sense of what "soul" means in that context, I needed something more specific to work with thematically.

I don't think it's controversial to say that this intuitive secular definition of a "soul" has something to do with morality, even if just vaguely, and even if that's not the whole of it. And because I needed somewhere to start thinking about this, that's the point I chose.

One philosopher who talked a lot about secular morality was Immanuel Kant. He didn't really talk about the soul directly, but he talked about a lot of things related to it like "goodness" and "free will," which I thought was a good enough thread to start pulling on. So Kant argues that there's basically only one incorruptible virtue, and that's "Good Will," or making choices intending to make the world better. To do good. Because every other virtue can be corrupted--Intelligence

can be used to invent nuclear weapons, strength can be used for violence and so on and so on. But the intention to do good, and looking at other individuals as ends unto themselves and not just means to your ends, is a pure good ("Immanuel Kant's Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals" 2015).

But Good Will, even as a virtue, is basically meaningless without "moral autonomy" (ibid), which as I understand it is just a way of saying that you've applied some putatively objective moral code--acting with Good Will--onto yourself as an individual actor with free will.

And so my working definition, just for the purposes of thinking usefully about this topic, is that a "soul," as we refer to it in those colloquialisms I quoted above, is a kind of "moral identity." The capacity to see yourself as an individual actor who makes specific moral choices following a principle of Good Will.

So for the purposes of this story, the "soulless" people are the ones who allow external forces--like corporations--to define their individuality and make moral choices for them, since for-profit corporations are intrinsically amoral--by definition they're only motivated by money. So if you allow your identity as an individual to exclusively be defined by your job or some other external context, that is when you've lost your soul.

This theme is carried by events in the plot, which I'll get to in the next section, but I'm also embedding it in the aesthetic of the dialogue. I've written briefly about how I like to depict dialogue as "verbal combat" because I think that can make otherwise dull scenes interesting to watch, but it also serves an important thematic purpose. Which is to say that corporate buzzspeak is one of the most obvious external symptoms of soullessness. Anyone who's worked near an office--or even some of the annals of academia--understands has heard their colleagues say things like: "Leveraging synergies to stack hands around a straw dog and evaluate the go-forward potential of blue-sky initiatives" or "the illusion of praxis functions as the conceptual frame for the ideology of the image." Both are sentences that, while syntactically coherent, are so puffed-up with jargon that they obscure the information they're ostensibly designed to communicate (or maybe they simply obscure the fact that they never had any information to communicate at all).

As George Orwell says in his essay *Politics and the English Language*, "[our language isn't] ugly and inaccurate because our thoughts are foolish, but the slovenliness of our language makes it easier for us to have foolish thoughts" (Orwell 2015) Or even cruel, brutal ones. Orwell goes on: "You can shirk [original expression] by simply throwing your mind open and letting the ready-made phrases come crowding in. They will construct your

sentences for you -- even think your thoughts for you, to a certain extent -- and at need they will perform the important service of partially concealing your meaning even from yourself" (ibid).

While he was skewering euphemistic political writing that rhetorically danced around justifications for state-sanctioned murder, the principles are the same in the modern corporate office. As James Gingell points out in a piece for Vice Magazine, we can see this most specifically and damningly in the words used to describe mass-sackings: "rightsizing," "streamlining," "restructuring" (Gingell 2015). By using the carefully-prepackaged ideas and obfuscatory gibberish of the modern corporation, people are letting their thoughts decisions be subsumed by Capitalist orthodoxy and, even worse, they're creating a shibboleth. They're defining the boundaries of a group identity that asks, as its price of entry, for your individuality.

STRUCTURE

The importance of sound "story structure" is comically over-emphasized in the professional discourse of screenwriting. While it's true that the screenwriter should be aware of and write toward the typical ninety minute runtime of a feature film if they wish to be successful, it is not true that they must slavishly adhere to the formulaic confines of the notorious "three-act structure" or the film will surely fail. At least, it is not necessary that they should *consciously* adhere to this formula, orchestrating plot points to fit descriptions prescribed by whichever Get Famous Quick manual happens to be in fashion at the time⁴. By their very nature, story manuals can only identify patterns in what has already worked--patterns which are no more similar to *will* work than a steak is to a newborn calf.

The one storytelling "rule" I (cautiously) adhere to is that stories are about people who want things, try to get them, but can't have them for some reason. In a sophisticated story the character may end up realizing that what they wanted was not really what they needed, but then again there is no requirement that every story must be sophisticated. I also accept that stories will mean something whether the storyteller intends it

⁴ Especially since these are all regurgitations of either Joseph Campbell's *Hero With A Thousand Faces* or Aristotle's *Poetics* anyway.

or not, so it's best to just intend it and get it over with⁵. In other words, I agree with Craig Mazin's assessment that "story structure is a symptom of character and theme," not the other way around (Mazin 2015). This is essentially a more usable simplification of McKee's arguments in *Story*: theme is the scaffolding used to construct the plot (115), which is nothing more than a series of choices made by the protagonist (107).

So if a story is about someone (protagonist) who tries to get something (goal), but can't have it (antagonist/obstacles), and a theme is an argument about reality that the character begins in ignorance of but comes to embody (central dramatic argument), the "structure" is just the right events in the right order that force them to undergo that change. Flowing from this, there is probably going to be a moment somewhere in the middle where the character realizes the way they've been living isn't the way they should be living (sometimes called the "midpoint" or "breakthrough"), and there will probably be a low emotional point near the end where the character has given up their previous identity but hasn't discovered their new one yet (the "low point"), and there will probably be a final confrontation with whoever or whatever was stopping them from getting what they wanted (all major plot points identified by Campbell,

⁵This is also essential for comedy, as a joke with no meaning essentially has no punchline.

Aristotle, McKee, and every other person who has made an attempt to figure out structure). And since space in a screenplay is limited, these moments will probably even tend to happen on certain pages! The important difference is that approaching stories from the inside out (character and theme) rather than the outside in (plot and structure) doesn't subordinate the personal creative expression of writing to an arbitrary, prescriptive construction.

None of the above is to suggest that I disdain the ideas of act breaks, turning points, escalations, reversals, and all the other things that that have emerged from the ongoing conversation about story structure over the years. I find many of these ideas very useful for planning and enhancing my stories, but I try to see them as what they are--tools, not rules. Some of the tools I used for planning and writing *Dirty Filthy Liars* follow.

UCLA PACING GUIDELINES

In 2010-2011, I did a workshop at UCLA where I learned a set of loose principles for getting a story to fit within the daunting limitations of 90-120 pages. Page numbers are approximate.

Page 5 -- Hook the reader. Open on something exciting and interesting that will sustain the reader/viewer's interest.

Page 10 -- Inciting Incident. Introduce some chaos into the protagonist's life and make them want something.

Page 17 -- Central (plot) Question. Crystalize that desire into something specific for the audience to hang on to, i.e. a "goal."

Page 30 -- Threshold. The protagonist starts to pursue their desire, and once they begin we understand they cannot simply go back to the way things were without suffering terrible consequences.

Page 45 -- Major escalation. The stakes are raised and/or progress is made.

Page 60 -- Midpoint/Breakthrough. Major progress is made, the objective may even be satisfied. The character's goal or "want" becomes less important than their "need," which is an internal objective tied directly to the theme or meaning.

Page 75 -- "False ending." A major plot thread is resolved. The story may appear to be over, but it is not.

Page 90 -- Low point. The lowest emotional point of the journey. It seems as though the hero has been defeated by the antagonist.

Page 100 -- Final confrontation. The protagonist confronts the antagonist, and either succeeds or fails.

What I like about this style of outlining--and the reason I still use it--is that it's vague, and it's much more concerned

with the audience experience than it is with specific types of events or sequences. Keeping it in mind simply ensures the story continues to move forward, and helps me fight off my own self-indulgent impulses.

ACT DESIGN

It shouldn't be too controversial to say that stories have a beginning, middle and end--which one could also describe as three acts, if one were so inclined. So another tool I'll use to make sense of the chaos of my early notes is by identifying certain moments that would allow the story to be described by the mythic story structure observed by Joseph Campbell in *The Hero With A Thousand Faces*. These are:

1 - The Call to Adventure

Something happens to set the protagonist's life out of balance--an event that can only be reversed by going on an "adventure" into the world of the story (Campbell 46). I like to think of this moment as the answer to "why now?" If I can tell a story about any moment in the character's life, I'm choosing *this* moment because of this event.

2 - Crossing the Threshold

The protagonist sets out on their journey into the world of the story, usually by making some kind of dramatic, irreversible choice (Campbell 64-73). Again, considering the story from the

audience's perspective, this is the moment when the storyteller starts to deliver on what's on the movie poster. If it's two spaceships dogfighting, I get the characters to a place where there that can happen. If it's a killer shark, the character starts to match wits with a killer shark. This is the end of the first act.

3 - The Road of Trials

The character encounters obstacles while pursuing their goal (Campbell 81-89). The obstacles must be meaningful in some way--they must challenge the protagonist's weaknesses and transform their worldview, but there's really no good reason to make this part more complicated than that.

4 - The Meeting With The God/Goddess

A moment when the protagonist either gets something they wanted, or appears to resolve one of the major problems that brought them out into the world of adventure in the first place (Campbell 91-92). Though I'm skeptical of this exact formulation, I do generally think it's a good idea to have a moment somewhere in the middle where I can change the direction of the story, if only to keep things interesting.

5 - The Magic Flight

Having succeeded, the protagonist must return to their original situation with what they've learned or acquired, in order to solve whatever problems existed before they left (which

usually had something to do with why they left in the first place) (Campbell 170). The way I see this sequence is that the protagonist is trying to return to their zone of comfort, but the story has changed them too much, or the circumstances have changed too much, or both. An even simpler version of that would be to say they continue to encounter obstacles, but the nature of those obstacles has changed such that they challenge the protagonist's internal rather than external self. The goal they're pursuing may or may not have changed as well.

6 - The Crossing of the Return Threshold

Campbell writes: "The values and distinctions that in normal life seem important disappear with the terrifying assimilation of the self into what formerly was only otherness" (188). In other words, the protagonist has been remade by the story, and the process wasn't pretty. In my opinion, this is the moment of maximum external peril and maximum internal change; the moment when the protagonist's sense of self is so utterly shattered that they are unmoored in the universe, adrift in the chaos of reality without a shred of identity to anchor them to their previous life. But then again maybe it's just simpler to call it a "low point." This is the end of act two.

7 - Master of Two Worlds

The protagonist returns to the original situation-- sometimes literally, sometimes just in the sense that they're

solving the problems that confounded them at the beginning--and either succeeds or fails (Campbell 196-202). Essentially, this is the final battle between the protagonist and antagonist, though not necessarily the antagonist's physical form. Before I came to York I struggled with this part, I think because I used to struggle with my understanding of theme. But as I've increased my knowledge and refined my tools, I've come to think of this as a confrontation between the *ideas and values* represented by the protagonist and antagonist. The actual external confrontation between them is merely the medium by which this occurs.

Those familiar with *The Hero With a Thousand Faces* will notice that I've left out many of the critical moments Campbell identifies as essential parts of the monomyth--casualties of my pragmatic approach to structure. The story points I've selected above are the ones that I personally find resonant and useful, though even these I reserve the right to interpret in whichever way best suits the story I'm telling. The purpose of using these isn't to give myself a coloring book for the script, but rather to give myself tools for thinking about how to create a satisfying sense of growth, momentum and change.

BRINGING IT ALL TOGETHER

Hook

Dirty Filthy Liars opens with Vic at the top of her game, more-or-less believing everything espoused by Lonny Eichman in the script's opening monologue. Her life isn't perfect--an uppity underling named Ben is openly gunning for her job, her boss Malcolm isn't giving her the support she needs, and things keep (literally) exploding at work (page 5)--but she's comfortably wealthy, good at what she does, and has the love and respect of her best friend/step-sister, Tanis (page 6). But then one day...

Inciting Incident/Call To Adventure

A mysterious someone (who later turns out to be Ben) breaks into the Apex Petroleum office after hours and inadvertently causes an explosion at one of their oil sands facilities (page 8). This catches the attention of Vic's journalist ex-boyfriend Cameron, who catches her off-guard with his call and puts her into an embarrassing position, threatening her already-tenuous professional status at work (page 12). She tries and fails to convince Cameron to back off the story, and she tries and fails to go over Malcolm's head and get around Ben's play for her job. So...

Central Question

In order to outmaneuver Ben, Vic decides to insulate herself from professional reprisal by saving a pair of geese trapped by the explosion (page 23) and making sure the world knows about it. If she succeeds, she'll take Malcolm and Ben off the board entirely, but if she fails, it'll mean a massive public humiliation and professional destruction.

End of Act I/Crossing The Threshold

Vic goes to Fort McMurray, but to get there she needs to get on a plane first. She makes the mistake of trusting Ben to help her, but he (maybe predictably) sabotages her instead (page 31). She uses the virtually infinite financial resources at her disposal to get a chartered flight at the last minute, though this is the last time in the story money will help her solve a problem without some kind of major additional cost.

Major Escalation/The Road of Trials

Vic arrives in Fort McMurray and faces her first obstacles in the form of Dave. She offers him cash for a ride so she can catch up with Cameron before he breaks into the site and humiliates her further. And while this works at first--while he seems to be eating up her company-approved spin--her pride causes her to overstep and she's ejected from Dave's (illegal)

cab, losing her belongings, ruining her composure, and even suffering some physical injury in the process (page 38).

When she arrives on the site, the manager, Osborne, initially doesn't take her concerns seriously. She must point out that Cameron might be a physical danger to the equipment in order to convince Osborne to take action. Together, they find Cameron and convince him to shut down his camera--and just to make sure he can't use any of the footage, Vic dunks the whole rig into the water. She doesn't notice, but this also dislodges her phone from her pocket, and she leaves it behind (page 44).

The loss of her phone is very significant. Up until this point in the story, the phone has been a totem of her fealty to the corporate religion, and a literal conduit to the petty little Gods that rule over it (i.e. "The Senior Leaders"). It's the first indication that her connection to her previous life--and previous worldview--is starting to dissolve.

In a plot sense, the loss of the phone also creates her next obstacle. Through a screwball series of happenstance, it causes another explosion at the site, which becomes a forest fire, which leads to a roadblock standing between Vic's geese and the local veterinarian she intended to transport them to. The fire and the violent sounds trigger an anxiety attack in Cameron, and Vic manages to talk him down (page 57). This is the first real moment of reconnection between them and, combined

with her growing suspicions about the absence of construction cranes at the oilsands facility, a further indication that she's moving, ever so slowly, away from her previous worldview.

One of Campbell's mythological components that I left out was "Entering the Belly of the Whale" because I thought everything useful about it was captured by "The Road of Trials." One thing I like about the "Belly of the Whale," however, is the imagery of the character entering a literal digestive tract (Campbell 74). I like this because digestive tracts break things down. In this case, it's the story's digestive tract breaking down the protagonist's flaws and weaknesses, rendering useless all the psychological and physical tools they've relied upon to keep themselves safe and ignorant up until this point in their lives.

Lastly, a note on theme. I wrote earlier that my working theme was "if you set aside your values for success, you not only endanger your own soul, but the souls of everyone who loves and respects you." In a nuts-and-bolts way, what I tried to do with this was construct every obstacle so that Vic was hazarding either her "soul," Cameron's or Tanis'. So when she lets the corporate messaging "think her thoughts" for her (Orwell 2015) in the cab with Dave, she's giving up her individual moral autonomy, and she's punished for it when he kicks her out. When she destroys Cameron's equipment, she's taking his individual

moral autonomy away, and she's punished for it with the loss of her symbolically-important phone. And when she gets Tanis the job spying on Ben, she's asking her sister to become more like her--more "soulless."

Midpoint/Meeting the God(ess)

Vic's "Goddess" in *Dirty Filthy Liars* isn't a character or even a physical entity, it's her success. When she returns with the (now dead) geese and successfully lies to the press about it, she's accomplished what she set out to do--spin the incident, put herself in the spotlight, and outmaneuver Ben. What she didn't count on was growing closer with Cameron again, suffering humiliation in the cab with Dave, or learning (part of) the truth about what Apex's senior leadership is really up to. Even though the changes have been subtle, she's too different at this point to enjoy her victory. She's starting to realize the truth of the theme, and so she makes the critical decision to honor her real values and start helping Cameron get to the bottom of Apex's skullduggery, thinking (wrongly) that she can both do that and keep living the way she has been.

False Ending/The Magic Flight

Vic returns to the city and is immediately faced with her biggest challenge yet: getting rid of Ben. She turns his

weakness (cocaine habit) against him, which (falsely) resolves the major conflict of the story, but we--and Ben--know it isn't going to be quite so easy (page 75). Her first major internal obstacle comes when the Senior Leaders ask her to prove her loyalty and earn her new position by stabbing a (mostly) innocent man in the back. In a way, they're asking her to give up *even more* of her soul by fundamentally transforming herself into someone more like Ben in exchange for what we can assume is a great deal of money (page 78). She accepts the offer and immediately begins to remodel her bourgeois palace (page 79), but when Cameron comes over asking for her help, she obliges (page 80-87). She finally makes the decision to *not* change into the person the Senior Leaders want her to be and to become the person *she* wants to be when she warns Malcolm about the impending backstabbing, and uses the press conference that was supposed to announce his sacking at to make the Senior Leadership of the company (which she is, at this point, a part of) publically culpable for its transgressions (page 90). She's punished for her newfound moral identity when Ben re-emerges as a self-proclaimed whistleblower and Vic's drug testing plan backfires and gets Tanis fired as well, threatening her two closest relationships (page 95), i.e. her entire internal motivation for doing the right thing.

Low point/Crossing The Return Threshold

The Senior Leadership doesn't take kindly to Vic's newfound moral identity, and so they do everything they can to get her to step down. Vic refuses, but escorted out by security anyway. On the way out of the building she's pelted with literal bullshit by protesters to match the verbal bullshit she's been spewing for years (page 100). This is the moment when Vic has changed fundamentally--she no longer holds her previous worldview or values, but the new set of values has yet to synthesize. So while getting pelted with manure is certainly unpleasant, the real "lowness" of this moment comes from her absence of identity.

Final Battle/Master of Two Worlds

Vic repairs her relationship with Cameron and returns to the corporate office for her final confrontation with the Senior Leaders (page 103-106). In this scene, not only has she rejected her previous worldview, she's willing to risk complete ruin--and possibly even imprisonment--for the sake of telling the truth. She refuses to tolerate corruption "because that's the way the world is," and in so doing she rediscovers her individuality and moral autonomy.

CREATIVE PROCESS

My creative process keeps evolving the more I learn about writing. When I began this script two years ago, it was very different than it is now, and working on this project is a big part of the reason why. The development of *Dirty Filthy Liars* has been an extremely difficult, but very instructive experience.

When I began writing this, I had only the vague notion that I wanted to do "something a bit like *Network* or *Thank You For Smoking*," but in the oilsands. I was attracted to the idea partly out of admiration for films in the genre, partly because it wasn't much like anything I had written before, and partly because I felt the need to write something about my experiences working in oil and gas in order to make those years feel "worth it," somehow.

I zeroed in on the character of Vic rather quickly. The idea of a no-nonsense corporate type who was actually deeply conflicted about her no-nonsense corporate type-ness felt relatable, original and funny. I also conceived of her relationship to a character that eventually became Malcolm--a sadsack who had been burnt out by all the no-nonsense and was basically just riding his life and career out until one of them ended. The contrast between those two attitudes made them an

interesting pairing in my mind, but as Vic became more and more of a loner I ran out of excuses to put them in scenes together. Maybe I'll get the chance in the prequel⁶.

From there, I started to play. I took Vic down probably a dozen different avenues before I plunked her into this one. I did probably a half dozen different outlines, three partial drafts and one completely discarded full draft where I had her matching wits against an enigmatic eco-terrorist, dealing with a superior's mental breakdown, and manipulating her way to the top of the corporation in full-on *Richard III*-style power games. I eventually came back around to something much closer to my original intention, but I don't regret my adventures off in the weeds. Learning what the story wasn't was as useful to learning what it was. After all, *Good Will Hunting* had to be an espionage thriller before it could become a romantic drama ("Good Will Hunting: An Oral History" 2016).

In each of these drafts, I tend to develop the cast first, by writing everything I know about my protagonist on a cue card, then laying three or four more cue cards around it in a circle. Each one of those cue cards becomes a "spoke" on a wheel, and I brainstorm a few different potential relationships to the protagonist on each spoke. Once I know how each of the characters will relate to the hero, I build the supporting

⁶This is a joke.

character out of the relationship, so that everything they do will affect the protagonist in some way, and through her, every other character. Then, when I twist the knob on one relationship, all the other relationships are forced to shift, and I develop a much deeper understanding of how the world of the story works. This starts to inform tone, plot, and theme.

Once I have my protagonist figured out, the hardest part is figuring out her goal. Sometimes, mercifully, this is the first thing I think of, but *Dirty Filthy Liars* was not one of those times. I eventually settled on Vic trying to save the geese (for selfish reasons) because it felt funny in both a low-brow screwball and high-brow satirical sort of way, which was sympatico with the unusual tone I wanted to achieve.

After that, it's all about coming up with a bunch of ideas for sequences and scenes, throwing them at the wall and seeing what sticks. Literally: I write out the whole story on cue cards and stick them to my livingroom wall with painter's tape and start moving them around like puzzle pieces until they tell the story I want. Then I flesh those out into an outline or two, then I sit down and write the pages.

By the time I get to writing, I try to have done as much analytical work as possible so I can turn off that part of my brain and be fully intuitive or "in the moment." I try to think less about what every scene means, and more about how it will

make the audience feel. I watch every scene in my head a half dozen times, then perform it for myself, then write it down. It's exhausting, but worth it, since I think it produces pages that feel snappy and visually "alive" in a way they don't if I just start typing. And I think that if I can say the dialogue aloud in a way that makes sense to me, then someone who is paid to read dialogue professionally probably can as well.

FUTURE DRAFTS

I'm happy with the current state of *Dirty Filthy Liars*, but like all good things it can be better. With the critical and commercial success of *The Big Short*, I anticipate that feedback I'll receive from my committee, my peers, and others in the film industry will start to push the script more in that direction (in fact, it already has). I'm open to this, however it's important to me it doesn't just become a maple syrup flavored version of that film.

More generally, I think certain parts of the back half especially can be streamlined and trimmed, and where the story delves into the mechanics of scandals and the byzantine rules of corporate culture it can be further tightened and clarified. The mechanics of the conspiracy itself underline the theme in a way I'm satisfied with, however I think it could even be refined further and hit harder. And of course every comedy can always be funnier. As a veteran of standup comedy and improv, I'm looking forward to gathering together a group of my funny friends for an evening and going through page-by-page to punch up jokes and add new ones.

Writing is rewriting. Directing is rewriting. Editing is rewriting. The script won't be done until the film is, and at

that point, the script will be irrelevant. Again: screenplays are weird.

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